



# UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

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## Who Will Remove Charles?

by Terry White and Meg Costello

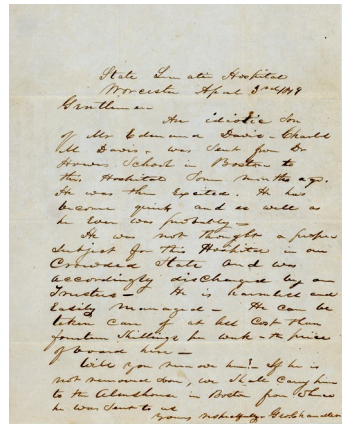
In 1849, Dr. George Chandler, Superintendent of the State Lunatic Hospital in Worcester, wrote to the Overseers of the Poor of Falmouth, requesting that they “remove” Charles M. Davis from his facility. Charles was a sixteen-year-old with mental disabilities.

Chandler explained that Charles had been sent “from Dr. Howe’s School in Boston to this Hospital some months ago. He was then excited. He has become quiet and as well as he ever was probably. . . . Will you remove him?”

In an earlier Untold Tale (February 2022), “Who Will Care for Alexander,” we explained that the laws of 19th century Massachusetts required each town to care for residents in need. Cities and towns were liable for the expense of their residents’ care, even when residents received care somewhere else.

In this case, no one doubted that Charles was a settled resident of Falmouth. He was born there in 1833 to Edmund and Mary (Hatch) Davis. The Davis and Hatch families had been residents of the town for over a century.

If Charles had been born a generation earlier, he might have been sent directly to live in the town’s poorhouse. Given that hospitals for the



cognitively impaired did not exist in Massachusetts until the 1830s, the poorhouse took on the roles of both hospital and asylum. A “poor census” of Falmouth taken in 1823 listed eight residents of the poorhouse as “insane non compos.” In 1842, an ell added to the poorhouse included two rooms for the “unruly and insane.” The town thus provided “care” for the mentally disabled, but in too many cases the level of care was substandard.

By the 1830s, advocates for the mentally disabled lobbied the legislature to establish state hospitals. The result was the establishment of Massachusetts’s first “state insane asylum” in Worcester in 1833, the same year that Charles was born.



By the 1840s, this movement was joined by Dorothea Dix, a Boston school teacher and writer who, while leading a Sunday school class in a local jail, discovered the deplorable condition of the mentally disabled in Massachusetts. The movement for “moral treatment” sought to restore mentally ill patients to a meaningful life, in contrast to the earlier custodial care that was often no more than imprisonment.

In 1842 Dix visited many towns across Massachusetts to gather data on how the mentally ill were treated. She then wrote a memorandum to the state legislature calling for state institutions that would provide better living conditions for those with mental illness.

Given that Dr. Chandler addressed his letter to the Overseers of the Poor, it’s likely that Charles’s parents had relinquished custody of him to the town. They had a house full of six other children, aged two to twelve, to look after.

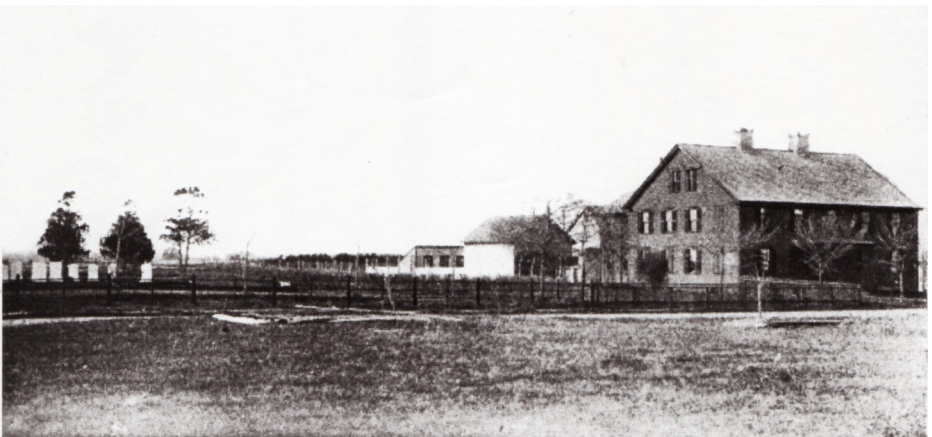
According to Dr. Chandler, before arriving in Worcester, Charles had been at Dr. Howe’s School at Perkins in South Boston. This experimental school was only a year old, and it was influenced by the ideas of

Dorothea Dix and others. Charles Davis was among the first students to enroll.

Apparently, Charles's condition became "excited" and he was not able to continue at the school. He was referred to Dr. Chandler's hospital in Worcester. After a time, Chandler notified the Falmouth overseers that Charles had become quiet again and that "he was not thought a proper subject for this Hospital in our crowded state and was accordingly discharged by our Trustees. He is harmless and easily managed." Somebody from Falmouth needed to remove him—in other words, come and pick him up.

An 1850 census shows Charles, 17, living in the Falmouth poorhouse and described as "insane." By age 33, in 1865, Charles was still in the poorhouse, but now labeled "idiot." He died in 1883, aged 49. The cause of death was listed as "burned."

Charles partook of both old and new, town and state methods of care for the mentally challenged. Even as the state took increasing responsibility for those in need, poorhouses continued to operate. The poorhouse in Falmouth continued to provide services until 1960, when another shift in philosophy called for deinstitutionalization. Its closing marked the end of an era in which residents relied on the poorhouse as a refuge from every ill.



Old Methodist Cemetery and Falmouth Poor House prior to 1896. Photo from *Falmouth By the Sea*, originally published by the Falmouth Board of Trade and Industry in 1896, and reprinted with additions by the Falmouth Chamber of Commerce in 1976.